

The Evolution of Heritage Management: Thinking Beyond Site Boundaries and Buffer Zones

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Heritage and economics are increasingly intertwined as the cultural sector strives to prove the relevancy of its work to broader social issues and more researchers seek to quantify the economic impact of heritage tourism. Heritage and economics intersect in funding proposals, regional development plans, tourism management strategies, and in myriad other ways. Yet there is often a sense that conservation projects and related economic initiatives evolve on parallel tracks rather than in an integrated way from the conception of the programme. Thus when the success of conservation projects is described, there is much to say about technical achievements but little about the social impact in an equally scientific manner. The dilemma for many in the field is how to move from anecdotal storytelling to scientific data.

KEYWORDS heritage tourism, heritage management, heritage conservation, Lalibela, rock-hewn churches

Introduction

From humanity's earliest records on this planet, we know places have been treasured, destroyed, rebuilt, visited, and appropriated for new purposes. As heritage sites move through processes of creation, neglect, rediscovery, preservation, interpretation, and public presentation, economic development is frequently presented as a foe to conservation. Yet increasingly, as evidenced by this special issue, the heritage dialogue frames sites as valuable educational and community resources, bringing jobs, tourists, and economic investment. Tourism is not a new phenomenon and neither is heritage management. Yet many working in the heritage sector sense strongly that the dialogue is shifting to arenas beyond discussions of artistic merits and cultural values to arguments that are more nuanced. We struggle to find sustainable solutions to balance community needs, visitor satisfaction, and to prove that there is both cultural and economic value in safeguarding the world's history, significant structures,

cultural landscapes, and natural sites that enrich our lives. The work of World Monuments Fund (WMF) at Lalibela, Ethiopia, provides a striking example of the challenges and opportunities in the field as well as the evolving dialogue about the ways in which the heritage community and those concerned with socio-economic improvement seek common cause.

The launch of WMF's first international collaboration

International Fund for Monuments (IFM) — the original name of the World Monuments Fund¹ — launched a project in 1966 to conserve the historic rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia. By May 1968, IFM had completed the majority of the condition surveys and conservation work envisioned at the outset. In 1967, IFM published *Lalibela Phase I*, which notes:

Our program has so far been supported by contributions from individuals in sympathy with the aims of the organization. We also use, where possible, locally-held funds generated by the sale of U.S. agricultural surpluses, in a seeding process which preserves the monument for posterity, and at the same time stimulates the flow of tourist dollars into the economy of the host country. The project in Lalibela is a splendid example of this arrangement. It is a joint effort involving close collaboration with the Imperial Ethiopian Government on a fund-matching basis. The International Fund engaged and paid the technical staff and provided the hard currency for the purchase of machinery and equipment. The Ethiopian Government, utilizing Counterpart Funds, paid the local workers and supplied the local currency for the purchase of materials and supplies. (IFM, 1967: 5–6)

When these words were written, IFM could not have guessed that this principle of participatory, collaborative funding would become the hallmark of WMF's Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve Our Heritage² — a programme that aims to leverage non-US matching funding contributions and has financed more than 200 conservation projects in nearly fifty countries to date (see Taboroff, et al., 2011: 5). Nor might the leadership imagine that, more than thirty years after the end of the initial conservation project, WMF and UNESCO would return to Lalibela in partnership with Ethiopian heritage authorities to tackle issues of advocacy, conservation, training, and community benefit. The sentiment expressed in the above-cited IFM report in 1967 dispels the notion that the economics of preservation were not being thought about in tandem within the scope of work as it was being developed. Tourism, too, although only beginning to be a significant source of the world's economy with the expansion of international air travel, was clearly cited as a benefit of preservation activities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela were already recognized as an important heritage site, and were listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1978. The churches are still a major religious pilgrimage destination and the seat of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. As early as 1959, there were published proceedings of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, an academic summit convened regularly over more than a fifty-year period: the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies was held in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, in 2012. Thus it is not surprising

that a newly formed heritage organization might well have focused on this site, but it is noteworthy that, against considerable odds, IFM — a fledgling group founded by a retired US Army Colonel — managed to find the resources to implement the project. Then, as today, the conservation challenges may be the easiest to address, but financing projects requires a different level of expertise and creative thinking.

The IFM report went on to describe the art, architecture, history, and cultural importance of the site, but it is telling that the opening statements addressed the financing of the programme and the need to undertake such work with a clear expression of local engagement. It is also critical to understand that the philosophy of IFM was to be an organization supporting the work and principles of UNESCO. Thus the conservation work by design was meant to adhere to the generally accepted principles and standards set through UNESCO's framework that guides much heritage conservation activity in the field.

Conservation and tourism

Tourism has grown and continues to grow worldwide, even in remote locations. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization's report, tourism in 2010 accounted for the movement of 940 million people worldwide; Africa's market share is 5.2 per cent and growing at an annual rate of just over 6 per cent (UNWTO, 2011: 4). In Ethiopia, tourism statistics have been tracked steadily since the 1960s and much travel is associated with the capital, Addis Ababa, as a result of business interests. For those adventurous travellers who reach Ethiopia, major destinations include the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Gondar, Axum, and Hadar, the site of the discovery in the 1970s of the famed skeleton known as Lucy. Not surprisingly, many of the sites visited by international tourists are World Heritage Sites: the World Heritage Centre's website reveals that, at the time of writing, nine of the 962 heritage sites inscribed are found in Ethiopia.

Yet, while there is great media attention paid to heritage traditions and heritage tourism, many worries remain about training enough people (particularly from local communities) to care for heritage sites, about securing enough funding, and convincing those outside the field that the work is essential to our collective wellbeing. As an example, UNESCO's recently stated concerns for reducing risk of disaster at World Heritage Sites notes lack of resources and trained professionals as a contributing factor on the landing page for this section of the website (see UNESCO, n.d.).

IFM's project in the 1960s and 1970s at Lalibela acknowledged the valuable role of tourism by virtue of bringing Ethiopian Airlines into the project as a partner, and the report cited above makes clear the local and regional economic value of the sites. Ethiopian Airlines undoubtedly saw a clear connection between investment in heritage and eventual tourism revenue. Yet, when regional development plans unfold, cultural heritage can often seem marginal rather than essential, and as a result becomes a footnote rather than a central element. For example, when *plaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York* (CoNY, 2011) and *plaNYC: A Stronger, More Resilient New York* (CoNY, 2013) were issued, it was a disappointment that such comprehensive, visionary statements about the future of New York City ignored the many historic assets that give shape and character to the streetscape and vibrant neighbourhoods in all five boroughs. There was no section that addressed how preservation of

historic structures could contribute to that more resilient and green city to which New York City might aspire.

Indeed, there are extremely generous foundations and individuals that support the field with great passion. WMF's work at Lalibela demonstrates in many ways this very issue of great attention to conservation, research, and training, but the data that would connect it to larger social issues is not necessarily part of the project planning. This paper demonstrates what has been accomplished at Lalibela, but also shows that the socio-economic information relating to conservation projects can be best described as anecdotal rather than scientific.

Conservation of the churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia

These churches, carved into live rock, first appear on the landscape in the thirteenth century CE. By the time IFM's conservators arrived in the 1960s, numerous changes had occurred over the centuries. While not apparent to the naked eye, a variety of studies commissioned by UNESCO and WMF from 2004 to 2010 confirm that the volcanic stone continued to evolve and was impacted by environmental changes. In keeping with the site's inscription on the World Heritage List, nomination documents and reports on the cultural importance and integrity of the site (ICOMOS, 1978) and periodic State of Conservation reports were produced and presented at World Heritage Meetings. In 1996, at the 20th session of the World Heritage Committee, the State of Conservation report provides details of the conservation issues at the site and references the IFM work supervised in the 1960s. It also importantly addresses some of the mounting urban concerns in the community

The site of Lalibela has been the object of several restoration campaigns [...]. Three successive campaigns were carried out: in 1920, in 1954 and in 1966–68 under the direction of Sandro Angelini [...]. The first restorations of 1920 and 1954, which were undertaken in haste, without scientific precautions and with recourse to cement, aggravated the situation. At the present time, several churches are protected by zinc roofing mounted on wooden scaffolding [...]. Although they fulfill their purpose, these roofs and scaffolding considerably disfigure the monuments and must be considered as temporary stopgap measures [...]. The situation in Lalibela is extremely delicate. (UNESCO, 1996: 14–15)

This report and others subsequently submitted to the World Heritage Committee demonstrate decades of attempted assistance to recurring conservation issues and site management struggles. In the 1990s, five structures at Lalibela (Biet Medhane Alem, Biet Maryam, Biet Masqal, Biet Emanuel, and Biet Abba Libanos) had protective shelters erected and roof improvements completed to address deterioration and water infiltration damage. By the early 2000s it was clear to many that these measures were insufficient, and wind and water erosion continued to plague the structures (Margottini, 2004: 2). All of this came to a head when a plan was formulated to create more substantial shelters for the churches; concerns were raised about the aesthetic impact of the shelters and whether they were addressing the conservation issues. There were also concerns about the potential for the shelters to increase problems by adding additional weight to the area around the structures. All of these are very normal concerns when there is an intervention of this magnitude at a heritage site. To frame this discussion, it is instructive to look at Figure 1, which shows the integration of the churches of Lalibela with the landscape.



FIGURE 1 Biet Amanuel (House of Emmanuel) seen from ground-level during conservation work, c. 1970.

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WMF returned to Lalibela in 2004 as part of a collaborative project with UNESCO and the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage in response to concerns about the introduction of new shelters at Lalibela. These concerns echoed decades of worry about the lack of full understanding of the underlying causes of the problems onsite and the need to engage more fully the local community in the conservation programmes undertaken at Lalibela. As a result, from 2007 to 2011, WMF and the World Heritage Centre commissioned numerous geo-technical surveys, conducted archival research, and completed several years of monitoring at the site. This joint collaboration with the Ethiopian government resulted in new efforts to think strategically about the values of the site: its religious significance, its importance as a tourist destination and as a generator of revenue for the local community. An important goal of the new effort was to assure that Ethiopians participated in the programme of documentation and conservation.

Thus, after an absence of nearly forty years from the site, WMF found itself in many ways beginning the process of collaborative conservation from scratch. The several years of study gave rise to some statements that now frame the conservation programme that is currently underway. The structures are free-standing and it is important that they be experienced as places connected to the landscape. The conservation problems of the churches arise from the materials from which they are carved and the evolution of the rock over time. The volcanic rock is prone to fissures, which leads to water infiltration. Water damage was evident in the mid-2000s when the European Commission announced funding to build shelters over the churches of Lalibela to protect them from further water damage. Regrettably, much water infiltration was from below, not above, and the heavy weight of some of the shelters creates other threats to the stability of the monuments. Shelters were erected over some of the churches, but in some cases they created obstacles to circulation and to the proper use of the spaces for religious functions. The decision to create the new shelters was not without logic, or precedent. As noted previously, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a temporary roof was placed over Biet Mariam and Biet Emmanuel. The 2007 European Commission project erected four shelters over five churches: Biet Mariam, Biet Maskal, Biet Medhane Alem, Biet Emmanuel, and Biet Abba Libanos. Figure 2 clearly demonstrates why there was concern about the visual impact of the shelters on the wellbeing of the site.



FIGURE 2 Protective shelter over Biet Medhani Alem (House of the Savior of the World), 2011.
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New programmes at Lalibela

In 2012, a major milestone was achieved through expanding the collaboration to include training in conservation to ensure local participation in the full breadth of work to be undertaken in the coming years. WMF's goal at Lalibela is to preserve the churches in the least invasive manner possible, using sympathetic materials when replacement or additions are required, and employing craft techniques rooted in local traditions. WMF's aim is to ensure that Lalibela endures, without subtracting from its essential character. In consultation with local authorities and UNESCO, WMF launched its conservation project at one of the churches in most urgent need of repair, Biet Gabriel Rafael. The church was recently closed due to safety fears; structural cracks threaten the building's stability and, during periods of heavy rain, water pours inside.

Training and local engagement is crucial for the success of the conservation programme. WMF's introductory training course with twenty participants began in May 2012. All participants have a background in traditional construction or conservation. Of the twenty trainees, four are women; two are heritage professionals from the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage; two are heritage conservation students from Mekelle University; and twelve are responsible for local management of churches in Lalibela. The training programme includes classroom sessions and field activities. Practical activities in the field include condition surveys, masonry work, and mortar mixing. Classroom discussion addresses conservation theory, understanding the range of methodologies employed at sites, and how safeguarding heritage sites is affected by local, national, and international conservation statutes and standards. The importance of local engagement in the site is multifaceted as it provides employment opportunities so that communities can become less dependent on foreign experts for caring for historic structures. Equally important is that fact that these sites have local, living meaning beyond their historic value and, as such, it is appropriate that local scholars, skilled heritage professionals, and site stewards should be empowered to take control of the long-term wellbeing of the sites.

In the spring of 2012, trainees participated in site visits to understand causes of decay and how rock structures deteriorate (see Figure 3). The group visited Biet Gabriel Rafael and carried out condition assessments of its roof, floor, walls, and surroundings landscape. They reviewed past conservation actions and the effects they had on the structure. The churches of Lalibela were an open-air laboratory for the students and they were encouraged to examine the conditions of other structures to become familiar with the problems common to all the churches. Studies were conducted at Biet Mariam, Biet Medhane Alem, Biet Golgotha, and Biet Giorghis. The group identified materials used to build and repair the churches and discussed the approaches employed, their effectiveness, and reviewed the challenges that remain to be addressed. They examined visitor impact on the churches as well as the effects of nature, such as exposure to the elements and animal populations at the site. Common problems presented included water infiltration, biological growth, and cracks.

The long-term goal is to establish a permanent team at the site to undertake repairs and monitor changes in the structures. Lalibela is the most important place of pilgrimage for Ethiopia's Orthodox Christians. The churches are owned by the



FIGURE 3 Training course participants clear the soil burden at the rock slab over the entrance of Biet Gabriel Raphael (House of Gabriel Raphael), 2012.

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Orthodox Church, and thus it was essential that church personnel participate in the training programme. The twelve participants employed by the Church could eventually form the nucleus of a permanent conservation and site management team. The participants are now beginning on site conservation work at Biet Gabriel Rafael, adding hands-on experience to their theoretical knowledge. The success of the first training programme demonstrated viable solutions for Lalibela. There are eleven churches at the site, and all are vulnerable in some way. Four of the most iconic structures are covered by shelters, which do not adequately address the most significant conservation challenges. Preservation across the entire site is now urgently required to ensure Lalibela endures for the benefit of future generations. WMF's partnerships with the World Heritage Centre, the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, the Orthodox Church, and the training programme are creating a strong foundation for research, analysis, conservation, and long-term stewardship for the Churches of Lalibela. There are many individuals who deserve praise for their vision for the ongoing work at Lalibela: the students in the training programme, the trainers, the Ethiopian authorities, the Church leadership, the World Heritage Centre, and WMF's staff and trusted consultants who have contributed significantly to the development and implementation of the project.

Discussion and conclusion

Lalibela's conservation challenges from the 1960s to today show the evolution of the field, but at the same time show that the best solutions always share certain elements: passion, adequate funding, local engagement, and a vision for stewardship. Fixing problems, as was evidenced from decades of good intentions throughout the twentieth century, can turn out to resolve only short-term issues or superficial problems. The collaborative engagement model, if successful, stands a much greater chance of adding lasting value to the site. Economics plays a key role in these solutions. To protect our shared cultural heritage, we must develop effective methods to show clearly that heritage sites are not a drain on economic resources. Lalibela illustrates that an investment in the site can bring great rewards. While we are trained to speak effectively about the technical conservation work and the cultural significance of sites, we must learn to tell the parallel story of the educational and economic benefits of sustainable conservation solutions that assure these sites contribute effectively to the larger regional and national development plans.

Notes

¹ International Fund for Monuments changed its name to World Monuments Fund in 1984. IFM's initial conception and remit was as follows:

The International Fund For Monuments, Inc. is a private organization whose program is based upon the concept that the world's great artistic, historic and archaeological monuments are part of the cultural heritage of all mankind, and that the preservation of these treasures is an international responsibility. The International Fund was formed on March 15, 1965 by a group of individuals

who recognized the need, long expressed by UNESCO, for an organization to assist in the costs of preserving monuments in those countries which lack the financial means of doing so alone. Our program has so far been supported by contributions from individuals in sympathy with the aims of the organization. (IFM, 1969: 5–6).

² Further information on the Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve Our Heritage can be found here: <<http://www.wmf.org/about-us/partner/robert-w-wilson-challenge-protect-our-heritage>>.

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